

ture." This eschatological theme has been a consistent emphasis throughout his writings, whether dealing with revolution, secularization, liberation, fantasy, or play. Here that openness is given a new twist: openness to the east and to the growing interaction between eastern and western forms of spirituality. The problem which Cox sees with American neo-Orientalism is not that it is so Oriental, but that it is not Oriental enough. It is too American. Oriental religion is translated into, dispensed through, and distorted by western, American forms. It becomes a novelty item—even though what is presented may be 3000 years old in its own context. It is psychologized. Its ego-emptying is turned into self-fulfillment. Its non-attachment is turned into a loveless and uncommitted detachment. Its spirituality becomes a new "product" which is "packaged" for sale on the competitive market as part of a "consumer culture." Its key terminology becomes a part of common slang vocabulary. And the result is "in some ways a combination of the worst elements of both cultures" (p. 139).

Cox does not, therein, call for giving up the dialogue and returning to a religious isolationism or Christian imperialism. "We have now come to a time when the meeting must take place not in the realm of ideas but in the lives of actual persons living in real societies—that is, in the flesh. When that begins to happen . . . then eventually the ideas will follow" (p. 145). In such a meeting, all of our theological categories and universalistic claims—and those of other traditions as well—will need considered rethinking. This will not come easily, nor will a meeting "in the flesh" alone achieve reconciliation. Old categories, old modes of conceptualization, old attitudes die very hard. Yet, if nothing else, the "coming world civilization," as Hocking once put it, will require it. It is the next theological agenda.

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## Dialogue: The Key to Understanding Other Religions

By *Donald K. Swearer*

Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1977. 174 pp. \$4.95.

Comparative religion is a prickly subject for Christians. To do justice to the good, the true, and the beautiful in other faiths runs the risk of relativism. But to stand firm for the imperatives of the Christian absolutes can slide too easily sometimes into iconoclasm. Professor Swearer escapes the pitfalls better than most, perhaps because he

avoids generalities and caricatures by focusing on a clearly defined model: an encounter between Theravada Buddhism as found in Thailand, and the classic Christian faith of the Pauline epistles.

He chooses dialogue as preferable to other contemporary methods of religious inter-relation such as William E. Hocking's principle of cooperation with all religions as essentially one, or Hendrik Kraemer's opposing insistence on the absolute discontinuity of Christianity and non-Christian beliefs, or R. C. Zaehner's mediating position which finds parallels of truth in all religions but claims a supreme role for Christianity as the fulfillment of truth in all faiths.

Dialogue, as Swearer practices it, is open, personal encounter without pejorative criticism and without loss of commitment to one's own beliefs. Its aim is not evangelism (though evangelists would agree that it is an important prerequisite to evangelism). Neither is it a surrender to syncretism. Rather, it is a path toward "deeper appreciation of one's own tradition through appreciation of another." With this in mind, the author compares Buddhist and Christian teaching on five major themes: attitude to the world; the meaning of persons; the relationship between faith and works; the path to freedom; and tensions between universality and exclusiveness in religious communities.

Rejecting the stereotype that Buddhism is world-denying and Christianity world-affirming, he finds (contrary to Durkheim) that neither of the two is so culture-bound by its stake in social stability that it cannot transcend culture and criticize it. But there is this difference in attitude. Christianity says the world is good because God made it; Buddhism finds it unsatisfactory because humans try to get out of it something which it cannot give.

Likewise in the Buddhist and Christian teachings on self-identity, he discovers in both a realization of the inherent polarity of human nature. There is the old/new creation in Paul, and the self/not-self (*anatta*) in Theravada Buddhism. But Buddhism, unlike Christianity, tends to deny the existence of the ego as an underlying substructure of physical and mental life. Nevertheless he feels that the Buddhist "emptying of self" is not negative but a positive transformation of identity that will contribute to better appreciation of the strong strain of self-denial running through biblical descriptions of the Christian life.

There are differences, also, in Buddhist and Christian descriptions of freedom. The Buddhist way, in general, is liberation by non-attachment and through meditation. Christianity preaches freedom by grace through involvement—the way of the cross. But the antithesis should not be allowed to obscure the fact that in both religions freedom is to be fulfilled in selfless service and, as he points out, activity-obsessed Protestants might well find deepened dimensions of inner freedom through Christian forms of "insight meditation."

The concluding chapter is an unusually effective turn-about. It asks Thailand's "most creative monastic mind," Bhikku Buddhadasa, for an assessment of Christianity from a Buddhist viewpoint. The good



monk sometimes misses the mark but even so gives us the rare, often surprising gift of seeing ourselves as others see us.

Donald Swearer, who has had extensive experience in Thailand and now teaches religion at Swarthmore, describes his own position as being nearer to Augustine than Aquinas, nearer to Tillich than Barth. His understanding of truth is "relational" and non-propositional. Very rarely does he venture to say someone is wrong. This has the advantage of avoiding the kind of premature confrontation that prevents dialogue from deepening into mutual understanding. It lends itself to friendly, courteous relations between good Buddhists and good Christians. But it may tempt good religious people to evade the all-important issue of ultimate, obstinate difference between good and evil, true and false, not only in the encounter with another religion but within their own.

Yet no book should be required to deal with everything. The author's insights into southern Buddhist truth at its best, his intriguing comparisons, his concern for mutual respect without loss of personal faith, and his advice on methods and conditions in dialogue are enough to make this volume an important tool for anyone, Christian or not, who takes the encounter of religions seriously.

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### Toward Vatican III: The Work That Needs To Be Done

*Edited by David Tracy with Hans Küng and Johann Metz*

New York, Seabury, 1978. 333 pp. \$14.95 (paper \$5.95).

### Signposts for the Future: Contemporary Issues Facing the Church

*By Hans Küng*

New York, Doubleday, 1978. 204 pp. \$7.95.

Both of these books, though different in genesis and genre, give similarly helpful insights into the surging restlessness of liberal North Atlantic Roman Catholic theology today. Neither work is strictly speaking a book in the ordinary sense of the word but rather a mini-library of collected reflections by one theologian or several on a variety of current religious issues.

Let us turn our attention first to the *acta* of the University of Notre Dame conference about "Vatican III." From May 29 to June 1, 1977, an international meeting of 71 Roman Catholic theologians and social

scientists was held under the sponsorship of the world-wide theological journal *Concilium* and the Catholic Theological Society of America in order to address the challenge, more symbolic than real, of how to prepare for "Vatican III." The women and men who attended were not duped into thinking they could ever convoke such a council but they did hope by this excess of fantasy to clarify their own present worries and priorities for the future. With few exceptions most of the input was from the theologians and sociologists from the United States and Germany.

These 27 essays treat of many aspects of the church's relationship with doctrine, ecumenism, individual society, reform, and worship. They reflect the scholars' impatience with the pace of developments in the post-Vatican II church, with what some would see as a complete stand-still in Vatican offices. The conference, as well as its *acta*, has a markedly Catholic flavor. Thus one would have to regret that, except for the Italian historian Giuseppe Alberigo and Hans Küng, the proposed "ecumenical council" seemed to be pretty much of an inner-Catholic affair. Given the history of Vatican II, it is hard to see how the Roman Catholic Church could make its next council a success without very close collaboration with the Orthodox, Anglican, and Protestant churches.

Still, one can find in this collection much practical, down-to-earth common sense which if heeded by Catholics would indirectly assist the wider community of Christians outside Roman Catholicism. For instance, Roland Murphy (Duke University) has several cogent proposals to modernize the official Roman Catholic teaching about the Bible on such issues as inspiration and inerrancy, and to capitalize on the collective professional expertise of biblical scholars in the preparation of Roman documents and position papers. He also points to the need to reformulate what Vatican II said only haltingly about the value of the Hebrew Scriptures as an independent source of revelation.

Likewise useful for the wider community of Christians is Hans Küng's masterful summary of the gains and successes of the bilateral ecumenical dialogues and consensus statements from the last 15 years or so. Besides being a most readable and sane assessment of these theological position papers, Küng's essay is a warning to the church's leadership that postponing decisive action on approving these statements will only mean that ecumenism will "shriveled down to a mere job for specialized theological puzzle-solvers, whose abstruse arguments have little or nothing to say to the ordinary Christian" (p. 77). From this essay one can also see that the classical points of controversy that were said to be the dividing factors between Christian communities do not necessarily have the same weight they once had.

Two theologians from Catholic University contributed valuable talks. Carl Peter presented in a very original and fresh fashion a view of doctrine as conviction cherishing freedom, cultivating hope, and sensitive to the difficulties of assenting in faith. Avery Dulles offered a modest description of the goals for future ecumenism within the ho-

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